**DOCUMENT RESUME**

ED 071 470 FL 003 489

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Seshadri, C. K. |
| TITLE | TESL and Spoken English in the Indian Context. |
| INSTITUTION | Maharaja Sayajirao Univ. of Baroda (India). |
| PUB DATE | Apr 70 |
| NOTE | 6p. |
| JOURNAL CIT | Journal of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda; v19 n1 p1-6 Apr 1970 |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29 |
| DESCRIPTORS | Audiolingual Methods; Educational Theories; *English (Second Language); *Instructional Materials; Interference (Language Learning); Language Instruction; Learning Processes; *Learning Theories; Second Language Learning; *Speaking; Speech Skills; *Teaching Methods |
| IDENTIFIERS | *India |

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the belief that the best way of teaching English-as-a-second language (TESL) is to provide the student with opportunities for hearing and speaking "Standard" English. The author contests C.C. Fries' view that "...speech 'is' the language." In India, it is noted, the greatest single difficulty for students is speaking English. The lack of any direct, positive transfer of linguistic theory to the development of TESL instructional materials is also criticized. The educational problems engendered by teaching students to speak English before reading the language are discussed, and concluding remarks point out the need for a revision in Indian educational policy concerning TESOL. (RL)

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

ED 071470

*Reprinted from*

THE JOURNAL OF
THE MAHARAJA SAYAJIRAO UNIVERSITY OF BARODA

Vol. XIX, No. 1

April 1970

# TESL AND SPOKEN ENGLISH IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

by

**C. K. Seshadri**

Department of English

This is an attempt to examine, in the context of the actual situation in India, the relevance of the claim made by linguists that the best way to teach English as a second language is to concentrate on the learner's hearing and speaking 'standard' English.

'Language is primarily what is said and only secondarily what is written.' (Rivers) This view claims the primacy of speech over writing in second language teaching. According to this theory, written language is not really language at all. 'Writing is only a symbolization of a symbolization.' (Trager) This basic assumption seems typical of a school of applied linguistics as currently preached and practised. A strong emphasis on the spoken language is so much a part of modern progressive linguistic pedagogy that to question it may sound reactionary.

Linguists advocate speech before writing because they say it is 'natural'. 'Speech has both ontogenetic and phylogenetic priority.' (Osgood) Children learn how to speak before they learn how to read or write. But learning one's mother tongue and learning a second language are not the same. The learning of mother tongue in one's childhood is an inevitable process; the learning of a second language is a special accomplishment. A stupendous amount of time and effort is given to L 1 learning. Strong motivation helps L 1 learning. Mental development and linguistic development go hand in hand. Almost from birth, children participate in the linguistic environment that surrounds them, to acquire their L 1 automatically and almost unconsciously. They have many hours a day for many years with more than one 'teacher' to help them learn their L 1. They are richly rewarded for the efforts they make. They imitate their parents and the other speakers about them, inaccurate though their imitations are. By a long process of trial and error, during which they make countless experiments and receive a good deal of explicit correction, they attain fluency. They talk to their brothers and sisters, they talk with their parents, they talk with their playmates; if no one is around, they even talk to themselves. Children do not have any 'problem' learning their mother tongue.

A second language learner, on the other hand, is already a practical 'expert' in his mother tongue. He begins with a highly developed sound repertory from his L 1. He cannot depend on his ear as the child does. He has difficulty because

FL003 489

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

of his native language listening habits. When he starts learning an L 2, new sets of decoding and encoding habits are formed in competition with the old. Patterns of L 1 interfere with the patterns of L 2. The learner of L 2 has learned to control his speech organs in a certain way that he has considerable difficulty in learning new speech habits. He cannot devote as much time to his L 2 learning as he did to his L 1 learning. He is often inhibited from freely imitating his teachers. His teachers of L 2 are so very different from his ' teachers ' of L 1. He has lost his flexibility and his learning an L 2 is a very conscious and hence, a difficult process.

Another reason why linguists advocate spoken language before written language is that learning the written language first makes it more difficult to learn to speak later, while learning the spoken language first is the best introduction to the written language. ' No matter if the final result is only to *read* the foreign language the mastery of the fundamentals of the language—the structure and the sound system with a limited vocabulary—must be through speech. The speech *is* the language.' ( Fries ) There does not seem to be adequate evidence to support this view. At the same time, we all know that interference in language learning is maximal at the phonological level. ( In India where most of the students are required to learn three languages, interference is from two sets of language structures. ) The greatest single difficulty of students for whom English is a second language is that of speaking it. Second language speaking requires a change in patterns of intonation, stress, rhythm and meaning in addition to change in the distinctive sound units we call phonemes.

' Mastery of a foreign language can be achieved by most adults, by means of a scientific approach with satisfactorily selected and organised materials, within approximately three months.' This is what Fries claimed in 1945. If this claim is valid, we do not know why no such course in English has yet been designed for foreign students who go to study at the American and British universities. Many of the courses offered now teach students how to answer a telephone, or how to order a meal at a restaurant but not how to write a term paper, or participate in a discussion at a seminar.

If adults can ' master ' foreign languages within three months, why do linguists suggest that it is of high importance to give students a knowledge of the new language when they are young?

Linguistics has made tremendous progress in the last thirty years. But it does not seem to have gone beyond the description of the internal workings of sentences. Linguists have shown us that there is a hierarchy of structures —from phone to phoneme to morph to morpheme to arrangements of morphemes. But they have not been able to go beyond sentences to groups of sentences to paragraphs of writing or a whole spoken discussion. One is inclined to agree with Sol Saporta who, in his review of Lado's LANGUAGE TEACHING:

A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH in *Language*, says, " ....The linguistic view of the relation between speech and writing has been converted by some into educational goals—it's more important to be able to speak than to read—and by others, including Lado, into one of what he calls principles of language teaching: ' Teach listening and speaking first, reading and writing next.' The principle is presumably based on the assumption that the facilitation from the spoken to the written form is greater than the reverse. Reasonable as the assumption may be, the evidence in support of it is mostly anecdotal, coming from generations of language students who found little transferability from writing to speech."

This emphasis on speech in second language teaching sounds a little unrealistic and impractical when we look at the situation in India. India needs English as a ' library ' language and as ' a window to the whole world ', to keep herself abreast of the world's cultural and technological progress. Most students in India learn English mainly to read books and journals in English since it is manifestly impossible to translate even the principal scientific and technical works, to say nothing of writing that has less immediate practical application, into the several Indian languages. In such a context, most of what the students must learn they will have to learn out of books. They will have to *read* them for themselves. Therefore, spoken language is secondary to reading and writing. Students in India need the written form of English much more than the spoken form.

Again, if we decide to teach spoken English first to students in India, what variety of spoken English do we teach? British, American, or Australian? Scottish or Received Pronunciation? New England, or General American? Do we recognise any standard Indian English? Do we teach formal, or informal, or colloquial variety of English? As we all know, there are numerous varieties of English divided historically, geographically and socially. Do we teach the twenty vowel phonemes of Received Pronunciation, or the nine vowel phonemes of General American?

" ....the oral approach—the basic drill, the repeated repetition of the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language—is the most economical way of thoroughly learning, for use even in reading, the structural methods of a language. Only when one has such a thorough control of the fundamentals of a language that he can almost automatically produce utterances in accord with the usual patterns of that language is he ready to proceed to the process of reading." ( Fries ) English is taught to about 60 million children in India. ( *India* 1966 ) This is just 32% of those who should be in schools. As India moves towards universal literacy, the number of students learning English will multiply at an astonishing rate. In another five years, it will be around 185 million. To teach 185 million children we will need at least a million teachers.

Can we afford to recruit a million trained native speakers of English to teach in our schools in India? !

It is a truism that the average teacher can teach only the brand of English he himself speaks. Ducks cannot lay hen's eggs! And a teacher who speaks with—let us say—a marked Bengali accent cannot be expected to turn out students who speak with a Received Pronunciation or a General American pronunciation, even if it were thought desirable that he should. To train all the teachers of English, in a country of India's dimensions, to speak Received Pronunciation or some other dialect almost perfectly, is obviously quite impractical. Even Western Europe, with its relatively good conditions of work and its long tradition of teacher training, can produce only a small numbers of of teache English with a near-perfect pronunciation. In India, with its vast population, very many teachers are poorly trained, overworked, and faced by huge classes. Perfectionism in speech is quite out of place here. If we try to teach all the small refinements of pronunciation, we shall end up by teaching nothing thoroughly. It is only by having limited objectives that we can hope to achieve success. For example, we do not have to worry ourselves about teaching allophones of /p/ to students in India. As Gleason says, "The reason for learning allophones is not that it assists in the use of language as a tool of communication. Its value for this purpose is at best very slight. Instead it is a matter of social conformity. If one sounds different from his companions, he is understood linguistically but suffers socially."

Linguists tell us that we shall never be able to teach our students to speak a second language with a perfect accent, whatever that may be. If that is so, why waste our time and effort on teaching Received Pronunciation or General American? Any mutually intelligible form of educated English should be universally acceptable, including educated Indian English.

Of the many arguments advanced to teach spoken English first, the least convincing is the one which says that when students go abroad, especially to Britain or the United States of America, they can easily communicate with their counterparts in those countries if they are fluent in Spoken English. Of the 60 million students in India, not more than 6000 are likely to visit Britain or the U.S.A. Even if these 6000 visit, they are not going to spend more than two or three years in that country. If it becomes necessary, these 6000 should be taught English in a special short-term course. Necessity may force them to learn the kind of English that is likely to prove most useful to them. Just because a handful may visit U.K., or U.S.A., in some distant future, there is no point in teaching the several millions, the Received Pronunciation or General American. It is a colossal waste of human effort and energy, even if it were practicable.

Another favourite suggestion of experts in the field of English Language teaching is the use of sophisticated electronic aids to help teaching English: record player, tape recorder, language laboratory, audio-visual presentation, film strip, sound film, radio, television, teaching machine, programmed instruction. Even the United States of America has not been able to exploit fully and successfully all these aids, in spite of its technological progress and its desire to innovate and experiment. A poor, developing country like India can ill-afford to equip its 60,000 plus schools, with all these teaching aids. Many schools, and even some colleges do not have a steady supply of electricity. The battery-operated models are too expensive to operate and too delicate to maintain, especially in the hot and humid conditions of tropical India. Air-conditioning of schools is no solution to the problem; its cost is prohibitively expensive.

There is no denying the fact that linguistics has made many valuable contributions to the teaching of English as a second language. It has definitely provided us a new insight. At the same time, let us not allow our enthusiasm for the new subject blind us to its limitations.

In countries like India, English is taught and learnt, not so much to understand the basic patterns of culture of the English speaking peoples as to address ourselves to the world at large and to acquire knowledge essential to our national development. English today provides the readiest access to the cream of world scholarship and to the bulk of world trade. And for years to come, English will continue to be the language of technology and commerce. This kind of English is the international variety, not British or American or Australian. To use Hill's term, it is a kind of ' neutral English '. And the spoken form of this has one distinctive feature—comfortable international intelligibility. It is time linguists worked on this kind of international English—reading it and writing it and speaking it. Reading English is what most students of English as a second language in India are interested in. Many would like to write in English. A few may be interested in speaking it. Let us concentrate on maximum usefulness.

**Bibliography**

Abercrombie D: " Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics, " London: Oxford University Press, 1965

Abercrombie D: " Elements of General Phonetics, " Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967

Allen H B: " Readings in Applied English Linguistics, " New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964

Allen H B: " Teaching English as a Second Language, " New York: McGraw Hill, 1965

Bloch B & G. L. Trager: "Outline of Linguistic Analysis," Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America, 1942

Dunkel H B: "Second Language Learning," New York: Ginn & Co, 1948

*English Language Teaching*: London: Oxford University Press

*English Teaching Forum*: Washington, D.C.: USIA

Fries C: "Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language," Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1945,

Gleason H A: "An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics," New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961

Halliday M A K, A McIntosh & P Strevens: "The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching." London: Longmans, 1964

*India* : 1966, New Delhi: Publications Division, Govt. of India

Lado R: "Language Teaching," New York: McGraw Hill, 1964

Mackey W F: "Language Teaching Analysis," London: Longmans, 1966

Osgood C E & T A Sebeock: "Psycholinguistics: A Survey of Theory and Research Problems," Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1954

Rivers W M: "The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher," Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964

West M: "On Learning to Speak a Foreign Language," London: Longmans, 1933